

NEW YORK TIMES
18 April 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

F.B.I. Questions Visitors to Nicaragua

By DAVID BURNHAM

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 17 — The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation testified today that F.B.I. agents had questioned 100 United States travelers to Nicaragua. But he denied that the interviews were meant to intimidate critics of the Reagan Administration's foreign policy.

The Director, William H. Webster, told members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights that "there was a specific foreign counterintelligence reason for each case."

"It was not the function of the F.B.I.," he said, "to educate individuals about political issues or chill political debate."

But Representative Don Edwards of California, the chairman of the subcommittee, and three other Democratic members said that because the country was sharply divided on the Administration's policies at least some of cases appeared to have the effect of intimidating critics of Administration policies in Central America.

Specific Assignments Noted

In response to a question from Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin, Mr. Webster said that the interviews had been conducted under the general authority of the Administration's partly classified guidelines and that at least some were the result of "specific taskings from the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency."

The Director added that he had recently reviewed these "taskings" — the word is Government jargon for assignments — "and I find nothing inappropriate in them."

Jerry Berman, legislative council for the American Civil Liberties Union, who attended the hearing today, said it appeared to him from the testimony and from reports around the United States about the F.B.I. interviews that top figures in the Reagan Administration had given the bureau an assignment that could only result in its questioning people associated with organizations that were openly opposed to the current United States policy in Central America.

At today's hearing, Representative Patricia Schroeder, Democrat of Colorado, cited one case that she said appeared to fall outside of Government-wide surveillance guidelines.

Inquiry Is Promised

Mrs. Schroeder said that on March 24 an agent of the Defense Investigative Service had telephoned Sally Brown, one of her staff assistants in Denver, to question her about people who had attended a prayer meeting commemorating the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador.

The Defense Department investigator reportedly asked Miss Brown if she had seen anyone selling newspapers at the interfaith prayer service and if she would be willing to identify others at the event.

Mr. Webster said that the F.B.I. has responsibility for conducting and coordinating all counterintelligence activities within the United States and that Defense Department investigators were not used in that kind of case. "I will make an inquiry about the matter," he promised the subcommittee.

David Lerner, a spokesman for the Center for Constitutional Rights, a New York-based civil rights group, said it had been informed of approximately 25 specific cases where critics of the Administration's foreign policy had been subject to F.B.I. questioning or other activity in the first three months of 1985.

In one case, he said, an F.B.I. agent left a card asking a Detroit woman named Amy Good to call him. When Michael Ratner, a lawyer for the Center for Constitutional Rights, returned the call instead, the F.B.I. agent reportedly said that the bureau was interviewing all visitors to Nicaragua and that it was making the calls for "positive intelligence gathering purposes."

Asked about the agent's comments by subcommittee members, Mr. Webster said: "The agent was incorrect. Of the thousands of people traveling to Nicaragua, we have interviewed about 100. If any agents are trying to push their views, they will be chastised."